

Norwegian across the Americas: New perspectives on
heritage languages

1 State of the art, knowledge needs and project objectives

Theoretical linguistics has seen a shift away from idealised, monolingual speakers in homogeneous speech communities (Chomsky 1965:3) to capture the multilingual reality of billions of people across the world. A productive line of research is studying *heritage languages*, which can be defined as languages that are acquired and used in the home, but that are not the dominant language of the larger society (see e.g. Rothman 2009, Benmamoun et al. 2013). Heritage speakers are often descendants of migrants, and they represent an extremely interesting form of bilingualism: the heritage language is typically the first language (L1) in terms of order of acquisition; however, it is not the dominant language, either in society or in the mind of the individuals when they grow up and reach adulthood. Research on heritage languages has the potential to shed new light on fundamental questions of linguistics, such as how stable a grammar is, once acquired (Scontras et al. 2015, Polinsky 2018); they provide an excellent testing ground for hypotheses about the effects of language contact, and they are windows into real-time processes of language change.

One heritage language that has received considerable attention in recent years is Norwegian spoken by descendants of the 19th and 20th century emigrants to North America (USA and Canada) (e.g. Hjelde 2011, Johannessen 2018). North American Norwegian (NorAmNo) is an interesting case study; one reason for this is that it has developed over several generations. The research on NorAmNo has also made significant progress in terms of documenting a moribund variety. However, some important gaps and challenges remain.

First, the research on heritage Norwegian has only concentrated on societies where English is the dominant language. It is not always clear whether an innovation is caused by crosslinguistic influence (CLI) from English specifically, or by more general processes of change (e.g. simplification or overgeneralisation); an example is the occasional use of the indefinite article in predicative constructions (*Han er en lærer* ‘He is a teacher’), which is unacceptable in homeland Norwegian (see also Section 3). Assessing the role of CLI is a challenge in heritage language research and in historical linguistics more generally (Benmamoun et al. 2013, Thomason and Kaufman 1988:57ff). To reach a better understanding of the conditions for CLI, and also the conditions under which general processes of change take place, comparative studies including different contact languages are required.

A second issue, which applies both to studies of NorAmNo and more generally in the heritage language field, is the question of how to establish the baseline to which the heritage language is compared. The most common method in research on NorAmNo has been to use homeland Norwegian (EurNo, Norwegian as spoken in Norway, including all relevant dialects) as the baseline (e.g. Johannessen and Larsson 2015, Lohndal and Westergaard 2016).¹ This method is useful for detecting changes; however, it has weaknesses if the aim is to get a deeper understanding of how the change happened. Today’s speakers of NorAmNo are typically 3rd to 5th generation immigrants, and when they exhibit unexpected linguistic features, comparisons with EurNo do not immediately tell us whether the innovation i) was already present in the input they received in childhood (typically from their family, who were also heritage speakers), ii) represents a systematic reanalysis of the input (*incomplete acquisition*; Montrul 2008, 2016:122ff, Polinsky 2018:24ff),² or iii) is a result of attrition, i.e. loss of linguistic skills over the lifespan (Polinsky 2018:22ff). Distinguishing

¹Some notable exceptions are Hjelde (2011, 2015) and Riksem (2017). Montrul (2016:168) discusses the baseline question in more detail.

²Polinsky (2018) uses the term *divergent attainment*.

between these types of processes is a prerequisite for understanding change in heritage languages, and new takes on the question of the baseline are necessary to make progress.

The proposed project deals with the morphosyntax of heritage Norwegian, and it consists of two strands, approaching the knowledge needs outlined above from two different angles.

Strand 1: Heritage Norwegian in a non-English context. The objective of this strand is to study novel Norwegian heritage language data from an area in which the dominant language is not English, namely Latin America. Between 1820 and the 1950s, more than 20,000 people emigrated from Norway to Latin America, especially to Argentina (Furusest 2013, Sæther 2015). Norwegian is still present as a heritage language in Latin America, in societies where the dominant language is Spanish.³ The project aims to document this variety (LatAmNo) by interviewing speakers; this will facilitate comparative research on heritage Norwegian with different contact languages.

Strand 2: Diachronic change in NorAmNo. This strand centres on NorAmNo; the objective is to provide new, diachronic analyses of innovations in this variety by systematically taking into account a new set of baseline data. The project will make use of a unique resource whose potential has not been fully utilised until now, namely recordings of previous generations of NorAmNo speakers collected by Einar Haugen, Didrik Arup Seip and Ernst W. Selmer in the 1930s and 1940s (see Haugen 1953). A number of these recordings will be transcribed and morphologically tagged.

The insights gained on both strands of the proposed project will advance heritage language research in general, and thus theoretical and historical linguistics.

2 Novelty and ambition

This project will, as the first study of its kind, document and analyse a new variety of heritage Norwegian. This is urgent: based on the preliminary information from contacts in Latin America, the remaining heritage speakers are of a mature age, and they have not passed the Norwegian language on to the next generation. The comparative view on heritage Norwegian, including both English and Spanish as contact languages, can lead to new insights about language contact; in particular the extent to which, and how, crosslinguistic influence (CLI) affects syntax, which is currently an area of little consensus (see e.g. Harris and Campbell 1995:chap. 6).

The systematic inclusion of data from Haugen and Seip and Selmer will facilitate in-depth, diachronic studies of NorAmNo on a scale that has not been possible until now: researchers will be able to access and search the recordings directly through a transcribed and annotated corpus.⁴

³This is based on information from contact persons who know the Norwegian community in Argentina.

⁴E.g. Riksem (2017) makes use of Haugen's data; however, due to limited accessibility, she relies on the transcriptions included in Haugen (1953) and Haugen's own discussions.

3 Research topics and hypotheses, theoretical approach and methodology

3.1 Research topics and hypotheses

The overall objectives of the project will be approached via more specific research topics concerning heritage Norwegian morphosyntax. Topics of interest are described in what follows; the further narrowing-down of focus areas will be guided by the collected data.⁵

3.1.1 Strand 1: Heritage Norwegian in a non-English context (LatAmNo)

For LatAmNo, topics of interest include i) predicative syntax, ii) the syntax of complex DPs, and iii) verb placement.

i) Predicative syntax. An interesting feature of the syntax of predicatives concerns the use of the indefinite article. EurNo does not use the indefinite article in predicate constructions such as *Han er lærer*, lit. ‘He is teacher’. Previous research by the PI shows that although this feature is relatively stable, a non-negligible subset of NorAmNo speakers use the indefinite article with predicate nouns (*Han er en lærer*), contrary to the homeland pattern (Kinn forthcoming). English consistently uses the indefinite article in these constructions (*He is a teacher*). On the face of it, it looks like CLI from English has taken place; however, the use of the indefinite article in NorAmNo could in principle also be an independent development.⁶ LatAmNo is an ideal test case to gain new insights about this question: Spanish, like EurNo, does not use indefinite articles with predicate nouns: *Es maestra*, lit. ‘(She) is teacher’. If the transfer account for predicate noun constructions with an indefinite article in NorAmNo is correct, the prediction is that LatAmNo speakers will not use the indefinite article. If it turns out that LatAmNo speakers do use the indefinite article, this corroborates the idea of an independent development.

ii) The syntax of complex DPs. In complex DPs, speakers of NorAmNo exhibit patterns that deviate from EurNo. This has been shown for gender agreement, possessive constructions and definiteness marking. Some speakers do not consistently mark gender agreement in the same way as EurNo; this has been analysed as attrition (Johannessen and Larsson 2015, Lohndal and Westergaard 2016). Other patterns have been analysed as CLI: for example, in possessive constructions, a minority of speakers overuse prenominal possessors (*min bil* ‘my car’), an English-like pattern, at the expense of postnominal possessors accompanied by a definite suffix (*bil-en min* ‘bil-DEF my’), which are more widely used in EurNo (Anderssen et al. 2018). Another type of development observed in complex DPs can be described as crosslinguistic *overcorrection* (CLO) (Kupisch 2014), whereby bilingual speakers overstress what is *different* in their languages, overgeneralising patterns that are typical for one language, but without extending them to the other. Previous research by the PI argues that CLO has taken place in certain possessive constructions in NorAmNo: some speakers have overgeneralised a pattern reserved for a limited set of kinship nouns in EurNo. This pattern, which involves dropping of the definite suffix with postnominal possessors, is used with very close family relations in homeland Norway, e.g. *mor mi* ‘mother my’, but it is also found with distant family relations like *second-cousin* and *nephew* in NorAmNo (Kinn 2018).

⁵The PhD student will be allowed to design their own research project.

⁶Norli (2017) proposes that EurNo may also be undergoing change, and it is not entirely clear if CLI from English can account for this.

Anderssen et al. (2018) invoke CLO to explain an innovative pattern of definiteness marking with modified nouns in NorAmNo: instead of the EurNo ‘double definiteness’ construction, involving a prenominal determiner *and* a definite suffix (*den grønne skjort-a*, ‘the green shirt-DEF’), many NorAmNo speakers skip the prenominal determiner (*grønne skjort-a* ‘green shirt-DEF’) (see also van Baal 2018).

Like in the case of predicative syntax described above, LatAmNo can refine our understanding of changes in the syntax of complex DPs because Spanish is different from English. Spanish, unlike English, has gender; this makes it interesting to investigate whether gender agreement is better preserved in LatAmNo. Furthermore, if CLI takes place in LatAmNo, we can expect a different outcome with modified nouns: Spanish differs from both English and Norwegian in that adjectives are often postnominal (*la camisa verde*, lit. ‘the shirt green’). The prediction is that CLI, if it applies, will affect adjective placement in LatAmNo.⁷ For possessive constructions, we do not expect a qualitatively different outcome of CLI (if CLI applies), since Spanish, like English, has prenominal possessors (*mi padre* ‘my father’). However, there might be quantitative differences: unlike English, Spanish also has a set of “long” possessive pronouns are used postnominally: *un amigo mío* lit. ‘a friend my’ (Butt and Benjamin 2011:94). The postnominal possessives can even, under certain circumstances, co-occur with definiteness marking (*en la novela mía*, lit. ‘in the novel my’, literary style) (Butt and Benjamin 2011:98), yielding a pattern that bears resemblance to Norwegian. The implication of this is that the Norwegian postnominal possessor construction is less different from Spanish than from English. Since it is less “Norwegian-specific” in the context of contact with Spanish, one might expect that LatAmNo speakers will be less driven to crosslinguistic overcorrection (CLO); a result could be that they are more susceptible to CLI, and thus produce more prenominal possessors than NorAmNo speakers.

iii) Verb placement. In EurNo, the finite verb is in the second position in declarative main clauses; this is known as the V2 rule. One – and only one – constituent appears before the finite verb (e.g. *Jeg har ikke lest den boka* ‘I have not read that book’ or *Den boka har jeg ikke lest*, lit. ‘That book have I not read’, but not **Den boka jeg har ikke lest*.)

In NorAmNo, V2 is generally a stable property, but some speakers exhibit V2 violations, producing strings like *...der dem lager vin* ‘there they make wine’, with V3 word order (example from Eide and Hjelde 2015:89). This can be analysed as CLI from English, since English allows V3 word orders. Spanish is like English in allowing V3; however, it does not immediately follow that one should expect the same CLI effect in LatAmNo. Eide and Hjelde (2015:89) and Westergaard and Lohndal (2017) note that the use of V3 word order in NorAmNo seems to correlate with another property, namely a low proportion of *non-subject-initial declarative clauses* (e.g. *Den boka har jeg ikke lest* ‘That book I have not read’, introduced by the object). Non-subject-initial declaratives in EurNo are regularly used to mark information-structural properties of the initial constituent, such as topicality or focus. This is less common in English, which to a greater extent keeps the subject as the initial constituent and marks information structure by other means. Westergaard and Lohndal (2017) argue, based on diachronic evidence from the history of English, for a connection between a low proportion of non-subject-initial declaratives and loss of V2: non-subject-initial declaratives are clear evidence that the clause-initial position is only loosely connected to subjecthood; this is a crucial component of V2 grammars. One could thus argue that

⁷CLI from Spanish could also affect definiteness marking in the same way as CLI from English: Spanish is similar to English in only marking definiteness once with adjectivally modified nouns.

CLI from English leads to loss of V2 in NorAmNo in an *indirect* way: CLI leads to a reduction of non-subject-initial declaratives; this in turn weakens the evidence for a V2 grammar, and leads to loss of V2. Now, Spanish is different from English in that non-subject-initial declaratives are very common; the topic of the sentence is regularly fronted (Butt and Benjamin 2011:528–529). The prediction following from this, if we assume a connection between non-subject-initial declaratives and V2, is that V2 will be more stable in LatAmNo than in NorAmNo, due to the more liberal use of fronting of non-subjects in Spanish.

3.1.2 Strand 2: Diachronic change in NorAmNo

For the NorAmNo strand of the project, the research will centre on linguistic features of today's NorAmNo that have been described synchronically, but whose diachronic development in NorAmNo has not been studied in detail. The diachronic development that has taken place *after* the arrival of the first emigrants will be described on the basis of newly transcribed baseline data from previous generations of NorAmNo speakers; see section 1. Topics of particular interest partially overlap with the topics of interest for LatAmNo and include:

i) Predicative syntax, as described above; in particular the occasional use of the indefinite NorAmNo (*Han er en lærer*). Previous research by the PI proposes an attrition analysis, i.e. that the use of the indefinite article reflects change in linguistic behaviour in the lifetime of the relevant NorAmNo speakers. There is, however, an element of uncertainty due to the scarcity of accessible data from previous generations of emigrants. A closer look at the use of the indefinite article in Haugen's/Seip and Selmer's data can be revealing: if previous generations of NorAmNo speakers behave like homeland speakers (i.e. do not use the indefinite article), the attrition account is unequivocally corroborated. If there is a significant use of the indefinite article also in previous generations of NorAmNo speakers, this means that today's speakers received a more mixed input than homeland speakers, which could be an additional or alternative factor leading to change.

ii) The syntax of complex DPs, as described above for the LatAmNo strand. This is another area in which changes have been detected in NorAmNo, but in which very little is known about the input to which the present-day speakers were exposed. Anderssen et al. (2018:759) propose an attrition account, both for the speakers who overuse the EurNo patterns (CLO) and the speakers who seem to be affected by CLI; attrition has also been proposed as a cause of changes in gender agreement (e.g. Johannessen and Larsson 2015). However, the new baseline data may show that today's speakers were exposed to mixed input, in which case their linguistic behaviour may reflect a more complex diachronic story.

iii) Verb placement. Verb placement in subordinate clauses is an area of particular interest. Many of today's NorAmNo speakers allow the finite verb to appear in a higher position than in EurNo, preceding negation (...*som forstår ikke så mye norsk* lit. 'who understands not so much Norwegian' vs. the homeland pattern *som ikke forstår så mye norsk*) (Larsson and Johannessen 2015:169). Larsson and Johannessen propose an account based on incomplete acquisition: in EurNo, the verb stays in situ in subordinate clauses; heritage speakers have not acquired this as an obligatory rule. However, again, the new baseline data can tell us if today's speakers were also exposed to mixed input.⁸

⁸A previous, diachronic study on V2 word order in main clauses in NorAmNo is Eide and Hjelde (2015). The current project facilitates follow-up studies.

3.2 Theoretical approach and methodology

The starting point of this project is that heritage languages are fully-fledged languages with internally consistent grammars (e.g. Putnam and Sánchez 2013, Polinsky 2018:75, Scontras et al. 2018:22). This implies that although heritage language data may look messy, due to, for example, problems with lexical retrieval and processing, there is an underlying, systematic grammar. The grammar may differ from that of the homeland variety, but the differences can be accounted for with the same analytical tools as those used for other natural languages.

The theoretical foundation of the project is generative grammar (Chomsky 1995 *et seq.*) This framework offers a formal and explicit way of analysing syntax, which is a necessity in the context of the research questions. Recent versions of generative grammar explicitly incorporate input during acquisition as a factor that shapes the grammar of a language (Chomsky 2005, Biberauer 2017). Since reduced and divergent input is one of the characteristics of heritage language acquisition, this makes the framework particularly suitable for the current project.

For the NorAmNo strand of the project, the data consists of existing recordings; it is thus possible to proceed directly to transcription, tagging and corpus studies. For LatAmNo, two field trips to Argentina and/or Chile will be conducted to interview speakers of this heritage variety. The target will be to recruit as many speakers as possible, but also a small sample size will be able to produce valuable results. The crucial point is to collect a substantial amount of data *per speaker*; this makes it possible to understand the features of their individual, underlying grammar.

Initially, it will be important to elicit spontaneous speech data to get an overview of the features of LatAmNo. Spontaneous speech will be collected using a combination of semi-structured, sociolinguistic interviews and peer conversations. Peer conversations will be recorded in a controlled setting, but without any researchers present; this will encourage the consultants to speak freely. The recordings will be transcribed and included in the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (Johannessen 2015). The project will also employ experimental methods to target the morphosyntactic research topics. The experiments will be reproductions of experiments that have proved to be fruitful with NorAmNo speakers, e.g. picture naming tasks or story telling. This will facilitate comparison between the heritage varieties.

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